

BOOK REVIEW

Gender and genre in sports documentaries: critical essays, edited by Zachary Ingle and David M. Sutura, 2013, Plymouth, Scarecrow Press, 204 pp., ISBN 978-0-8108-8788-6, \$65.00/£39.95 (hard- back), ISBN 978-0-8108-8787-9, \$64.99/£39.95 (eBook)

Focusing on sport documentaries, Zachary Ingle and David Sutura bring together an engaging collection of essays on a relatively untapped subject area within the field of both sport and media/film studies. Moreover, there is a refreshing diversity to the sports and documentaries discussed, as well as the forms of analysis that are applied. Thus, while mainstream sports are touched upon (incorporating baseball, basketball, American Football and Formula One motor-racing), intriguing case studies on lesser known or marginalised forms are also provided through examinations of ‘battle gaming’ (also known as live action role playing), professional wrestling and wheelchair rugby. Indeed, the inclusive nature and resultant illuminating discussions are a strength of the book.

Including these case studies of course can open the book up to debates about what constitutes ‘sport’, but such concerns are addressed within the subsequent discussions (for example clarifying the physicality and training for battle gaming), while their inclusion offers more diverse insights into the genre of sporting documentaries. Indeed, such case studies furnish a more varied analysis of sites for gender construction, specifically for masculinity via assumed hegemonic, racial, disabled and commercialised discourses, while also broadening notions of the authentic and the socio-mediated

realities that are encapsulated within and exposed through the medium of the sports documentary.

In terms of organization, the book has three subsections premised on 'aesthetic approaches', 'gender and sexuality' and 'sports on the margins'. The first and longest subsection on aesthetics is arguably the strongest, with a useful examination of the craft of the sports documentary, as well as the interesting interplay of authenticity, performance and the obfuscation of reality that permeates this filmic genre. Indeed, shunning the pretense or assumption that these non-fiction films document the reality of sport, the authors deconstruct both the layers of production, as well as gendered performances of the primarily male athletes within the broader socio-cultural and economic realities of their specific sporting contexts. In this manner, the chapters afford rich investigations into their subject matter.

For example, Shane Toepfer conceptualises the bourgeois and aesthetic values within *The Wrestling Road Diaries* film (and the broader connections between performance and authenticity for the wrestlers) in a coherent and lucid form, while integrating insights from key scholars such as Bazin, Bourdieu and Barthes. Equally, Patrick Terry's chapter on *Senna* is an excellent discussion of how the assembled archival footage (and Formula One's televisual technologies) serve to render a pervasive visuality and style, while in turn contributing to an accessible and compelling Senna narrative for its audience. Unfortunately, within this section, Soumitra Ghosh's reading of *Murderball* through a

hyper-capitalism lens is less convincing and produces a more confusing chapter for the reader that tends to get buried in theory and speculative interpretations.

Arguably, the two remaining sections are more problematic due to their arbitrary divisions while, overall, there are some inherent weaknesses to the book that are either assumed or largely unacknowledged within its title and content. The first is despite 'gender' in its title (and its delineation as a subsection) all of the chapters are essentially explorations of masculinities within and across sports documentaries, with little attention paid to female sports, athletes or experiences. The one chapter that hints at this possibility, Sarah Boslaugh's work on gay, lesbian and transsexual documentaries, essentially surveys a variety of filmic works in fleeting fashion while, problematically, two (of her three) detailed case studies are about men taking on transgendered sporting identities. The edited collection perhaps is better served to present itself as an examination of masculinities (both hegemonic and divergent) in sports documentaries.

Another unacknowledged problem is that the book by-and-large lacks global emphasis or appeal. Thus the content and case studies are primarily American-based sports, personalities and connections, producing a presentation style favouring a North American rather than global readership. For example, Cynthia Fuchs' opening chapter on aesthetic images and memories forged through documentaries includes a discussion of *Catching Hell* and fan Steve Bartman's catch during the 2003 World Series. However, the significance and focus on this 'moment' is arguably lost on a non-American and/or non-baseball literate reader and only passing inferences made as to why such a film was made

or relevant. Even the one rare non-North American sporting figure, Patrick Terry's engaging exploration of the filmic representation of Brazilian Formula One driver Ayrton Senna, still largely addresses an assumed American reader by making connections to American contexts and media examples (reality TV, ESPN programming and so forth).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that one of the book's key strengths is that the majority of the chapters are underpinned by a continual contestation of accepting the documentary as a factual and truthful account. Hence, the inclusion of four chapters on professional wrestling offers a useful through-line for exposing the artifice of performance and authenticity in both documentary film-making and for sites of masculinity, as well as an interesting context for seeing how various performances get blurred. In this vein, both Dan Ward's chapter on constructions of masculinity and authenticity, and Keith Corson's account on the death of Kayfabe (the illusion of wrestling's authenticity) interrogate *Wrestling with Shadows* to reveal how wrestling stars such as Bret 'Hitman' Hart struggle to manage (hyper)masculine expectations or to distinguish, demarcate and control their intertwining professional and personal lives and personas. In fact, given the strength of the wrestling chapters, perhaps these could have constituted a separate, specialised subsection within the book.

Overall, *Gender and Genre in Sports Documentaries* is an enjoyable read and easily accessible for scholars and students, offering an informative text that would complement screenings of the set films, as well as analyses of authenticity, masculinities and performances in and across documentaries for sport, film and media researchers.

Damion Sturm

University of Waikato,

damion.sturm@gmail.com